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The stories of our lives: Using reflective writing for learning in the content areas

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

-Marcel Proust

The use of reflective practice for learning is to have new eyes and see new landscapes or connections between landscapes. The use of reflection in a meaningful and consistent way is where real learning takes place and students are able to make connections between their lives and experiences with the content subject under study. Aware of this, many of us already use such activities as journal writing or the compilation of portfolios to encourage reflective thinking in our students. This column addresses the issue of teaching our students the meaning of reflective writing as a different form than other types of writing and illustrates how to use it in the content classroom.

On many occasions when I have asked students to engage in reflective writing or discussion on a topic, book, or essay, what I get back are either chronological summaries or very intimate diary-type revelations. Neither of these responses is appropriate to the goals of using reflective writing or discussion in the classroom. What I have learned from these earlier attempts is that our students need and deserve to be taught what reflective writing is and how to use it for deeper understanding of

classroom concepts and the world around us.

What is reflective writing?

Reflective writing is both personal and public. When using reflection, it becomes the learners' responsibility to move back and forth between their own experiences, the text under discussion, and their world knowledge. With my students, I use the analogy of an accordion - move in and out from your own experiences, to the text, to your community. What are the connections you find there? Reflection is most definitely not a summary of the text under discussion. It is a response to a text that requires careful thoughtfulness on the connections between the text, the student, and classroom concepts. Consider the reflections of a preservice education student after reading, *All Quiet on the Western Front*:

The battle has ended and I have watched the men killing the lice which have been plaguing them. How is it possible to continue like this? I am forced to consider my own studies as the men (in the book) wonder what good their previous education has been for them. What good will mine be? Will I use mine to change things for the better? Will I really be able to make a difference?

This student was able to internalize the angst of the men on the front lines in World War I and then go outward to look at her own goal of being a teacher and concerns for her impact on her own community. This interaction with the text and with oneself is the goal

of reflection and is where deep level, authentic learning takes place. Consistent, meaningful, structured time for reflection should be a part of every student's day in the classroom. This is how we support our students in being thoughtful, critical readers rather than simply consumers of information or literature. Regie Routman (1996) describes the use of reflective pedagogy this way:

Students and teachers are constantly self-monitoring and reflecting: Why am I doing this? What do I need to do/learn next? Along with learner-directed inquiry, there is constant re-examination and reevaluation of our beliefs and practices. Students are viewed as learners, not test takers. (p. 48)

How to implement reflective writing as a strategy for classroom use

The case for using reflective thinking and writing as a pedagogy has already been well established. Canning, C., (1991), Freiberg, H.J. & Waxman, H. (1990), Routman, R. (1996), and Vygotsky (1978) are among just a few of the researchers/teachers who have been advocating for reflection in our classrooms. The question here is how do we structure and incorporate reflective writing/discussions into classrooms with already full curriculums? Select a story, essay, or piece of literature that fits in with the concept under study. See earlier issues of *The Dragon Lode* for many excellent book recommendations for use in content areas, particularly in History, Science, and Music.

As an example, you are teaching a unit in health class on debilitating diseases. A must-read selection for this topic is *Petey* (1998), by Ben Mikaelson. *Petey* is the life story of a man with cerebral palsy and the people who become his friends. It is beautifully written and highly recommended for its own sake. In addition, its potential for reflective discussion and/or writing is very strong. You might ask students to conduct some role playing on paper. Have them take on the role of Petey in the book and write a letter from him to themselves. Or, students could take on the role of any one of the friends of Petey and write a letter to him describing how their feelings about him have changed as they got to know him. After the reading, reflecting, and writing time has been sufficient it is important to bring the students back to the content area of study. What

insights have they gained about debilitating diseases and how can we support people in our communities who must live with them? Reflection is about making connections between the text, the topic, and our communities.

“By writing and returning to what is written, there is time for ... imprinting-making connections that might otherwise be overlooked.” (Holly, 1989, p. 9)

The area of history is rife with wonderful books on every era that make the learning and understanding of history much more of a joy than any textbook could ever attempt to do. One of my favorites in this genre is *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (1995) by Christopher Paul Curtis. This is a great read-aloud book for its humor and descriptions of family interactions. But it is also a very moving book about the civil rights movement and the 1960's era. This book demands reflection on such topics as civil rights, family interactions, children's playground behavior, and many others. Then again, as with *Petey*, it is important to bring the students' attention back to their own lives and daily decisions. This book could become the focus for a current events unit on hate crimes and what to do about them in our cities, schools, and towns. Reflection is about learning and taking ownership for that learning.

This section would be incomplete if I did not include one of my favorite young adult novels that lends itself to reflection and fits so well into the science curriculum. The dedication of the novel, *Phoenix Rising* (1995) by Karen Hesse reads as follows: “For the children of Three Mile Island. For the children of Chernobyl. For all of us, children of a nuclear age.” As you might guess from the dedication of the book, this is a story about a nuclear power plant failure and the community in which it is housed. However, this community, instead of being in Russia, is just outside of Boston. This book brings to the forefront basic ecological issues, pollution concerns, and raises quite a few questions about the energy crisis. It is very well written, but can be frightening to students unless they are carefully led through the book and given plenty of support while reading it. This text offers a good opportunity for students to work together and consider solutions to any issues appropriate to the science curriculum, from energy problems to

community support and responsibility issues. This book is also a good one to use as a segue into a reflective session on the year Y2K and how our schools and communities can be thinking about it.

These examples and recommended literature are just a very few of the options open to teachers in using good literature, essays or shorter segments of stories, as a way to encourage students' reflective thinking and writing in order to more deeply connect with the relevancy of their content studies. The case can not be made strong enough for this kind of teaching/learning. Let me emphasize it one more time with a quote from the student reflecting on *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Sheryl writes:

I put the book down and reflect for awhile. How does one respond to the story I'm hearing? I wonder how many people who are alive today have seen things such as this. I think of my mother, a small, soft-spoken Vietnamese woman who came to America before the end of the war in her country. How much death has she seen? How much destruction has she known? With her father being an officer in the South Vietnamese army, chances are good her entire family was killed when the Viet Cong took over the South. Will we ever learn? Will we ever change?

It is apparent from these reflections that Sheryl has learned a great deal about the lives of men in World War I and has been able to bring that learning to considerations of her own life and times. This is evidence of authentic and lasting learning. This is where reflection in the classroom can take us. I join my voice with many researchers and teachers in inviting you to embark on the journey with your students.

General guidelines to give students before reflective writing

- Avoid summarizing what you have read.

Reflective writing is a different kind of writing from summary writing.

- Ponder the implications of the text, both for its time and ours.
- Connect the text to your own life or experiences, then move outward. Remember the accordion analogy.
- Construct knowledge in personal, subjective ways as well as from factual, objective positions.
- Consider how the theme of the story or novel may fit into the puzzle pieces of our lives and the intricacies of society and its problems in general.

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